DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 196 201 EC 131 328

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TITLE Selected Reading Language Arts Activities for Gifted and Able Junior High School Students.
INSTITUTION Pennsylvania State Dept. of Education, Harrisburg. Bureau of Curriculum Services.
PUB DATE 80
NOTE 17p.

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Content Area Reading; Discovery Learning; *Gifted; Junior High Schools; *Language Arts; *Learning Activities; *Reading Programs

ABSTRACT

The author describes some of the techniques used in the Pennsylvania Comprehensive Reading Communication Arts Plan (PCRP) which provides reading/language arts activities for junior high school level gifted students. It is explained that PCRP experiences include responding to literature, sustained silent reading of self selected books, oral and written composing, and investigating and mastering language patterns. Guidelines are offered for a 4 week Inquiry Reading program, the construction and use of Think Boxes, and implementation of Symbol Story activities. (SBH)

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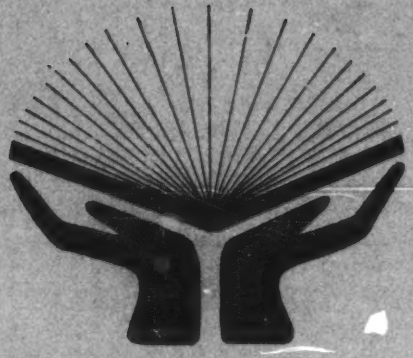
FOR GIFTED AND ABLE JUNIOR HIGH SCHOOL STUDENTS



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AUG 4 1980

This is the first of what will be a series of articles concerning curriculum instruction in reading for middle, junior high and senior high school students. School districts are encouraged to offer suggestions for future publications by contacting:

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Selected Reading/Language Arts Activities for Gifted and Able Students in the Junior High

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For the purposes of this paper, "gifted" will generally refer to those children identified for a specific program (i.e. those children with I.Q.'s above 130 in Pennsylvania). "Able" children are those who may exhibit some of the same learning behaviors but for one reason or another do not meet the specific criteria for the gifted program.

"My child take reading in the junior high? That's ridiculous! It's a waste of his time. He is gifted!"

The words above are those of a fictional parent upon hearing that his or her child was scheduled for reading instruction in the junior high. Although the exact quote is fabricated, the sentiment and concern expressed have been echoed by both parents and teachers of gifted and able children. To these parents and teachers, reading instruction is not a priority. For the most part, though, these parents and teachers have a somewhat narrow conception of just what reading and reading instruction actually are. To them, reading is decoding the pronunciation of words and ascertaining their meaning. Reading instruction consists of basal readers, workbooks, and reading groups -- all of which are usually associated with the elementary school.

Certainly, if this conception of reading and reading instruction were accurate, then these parents and teachers of gifted children would have a justifiable concern because, generally, precocious children have mastered the basic decoding and comprehension strategies which usually constitute much of the work in basal reading series and other materials at the elementary level. This type of instruction and this type of material should not be a part of the curriculum for most gifted students at the junior high level.

"Well, then, if reading is not sounding out words, and reading instruction is not a basal reader - what is it?"

As delineated in the Pennsylvania Comprehensive Reading Communication Arts Plan, reading is a thinking process necessary for obtaining meaning from the printed word. Reading is just one of the communication processes which cannot be isolated from listening, speaking and writing. PCRP also prescribes four instructional experiences critical to reading and the communication process. They include:

- Responding to Literature
- Sustained Silent Reading of Self-Selected Books
- Composing; Oral and Written
- Investigating and Mastering Language Patterns (sound/spelling, syntax and meaning)

These four experiences form the basis of instruction for all students: including gifted and able children. Furthermore, these four experiences should constitute the basis for all reading language arts activities in all content areas.

There are, of course, many language activities which should prove meaningful to the gifted child at the junior high level. Some of these are delineated below.

INQUIRY READING

Dorothy Sisk (1977), former director of the USOE Office for the Gifted and Talented says that inquiry learning techniques are one of the most significant teaching strategies to be used with gifted youngsters since students definitely fill the central guiding role in this activity (1977, p. 71).

Furthermore, Joseph Renzulli, another distinguished authority in gifted education (1977), has said that inquiry activities, which he calls "Type III Enrichment -- Individual and Small Group Investigations of Real Problems," are the essential components of any program for gifted students. His conclusions were based on the study of gifted and talented individuals who attained prominence in the adult world. Based on this research, he concluded that gifted students must be provided with activities in which they "use real-world methods of inquiry to become 'first hand investigators' in the particular area in which they choose to work."

Inquiry learning and inquiry teaching have long been advocated by authorities in the fields of science and social studies. However, in reading/language arts only Russell Stauffer (1975) has been a strong proponent of inquiry learning. He defines "Inquiry Reading" as an independent investigation conducted by a student into a particular subject in which he/she has an interest. The result of the inquiry is a project which communicates the results of the investigation. Stauffer lists the following prerequisites which must be met if an Inquiry Reading activity is to be successful:

1. "...some kind of focus for their attention - an aim, a purpose, a goal."

2. "...physical freedom to select data from a wide range of media and intellectual freedom to process the data so as to satisfy the cognitive needs."

3. "...a library or a multi-media center where they can seek data so they do not return empty handed."

4. "...situations in which they can share creatively and also be attentive sharers." (Stauffer, 1975 pg. 227 & 228)

Although the Inquiry Reading theory appears to meet the needs of the gifted student, experience has shown that both the teacher and student are more secure if the initial activities are carefully structured. Inquiry Reading activities are usually planned to take approximately twenty forty-five minute periods of instruction. Usually, this would constitute a four week block of time.

First Week

During the first week of Inquiry Reading a number of activities are completed. First, the term "inquiry" is defined. Various dictionaries are consulted, and the students suggest definitions. Then, the teacher explains the parameters of Inquiry Reading, telling students that they will be able to investigate some subject of interest to them during the next four weeks and that they will be expected to share the results of their inquiry by means of a project of some kind. After parameters are established, students brainstorm about various areas of interest. A homework assignment is given asking students to develop three questions they would like to investigate in the forthcoming weeks. When the questions are returned, the teacher and student select one question which the student will investigate. Experience has shown that having the student generate three possible questions for research is desirable since some of the questions will probebly be too narrow to sustain four weeks of inquiry (i.e. How far is it from the earth to the moon?); and some questions will most likely be too broad for four weeks work (i.e. What is Asia like?)

Once a question for inquiry is selected, students and teachers discuss possible references and resources which could provide information and background. A trip to the library is usually planned. However, the use of people as resources is encouraged. Students review proper interview procedures, and each student is asked to list at least one person to serve as a resource for the Inquiry Reading activity.

Also, during the first week the student must select and plan an "announcement project" which will communicate to others the results of his or her inquiry. Some past student projects have included: a large mural which could be used as a guide in sharing; a diorama; an experiment; a self-made filmstrip; a newspaper; a research paper; and a videotape. Whatever the "announcement project," it must readily convey to listeners and/or readers the results of the student's inquiry.

The last activity completed in the first week is the generation of a student contract in which dates for completing various activities are established. Although the overall parameters for the Inquiry Reading activity have been established by the teacher, students must establish completion dates for when they will have found all their reference materials, when they will begin their projects, and when they will share their projects with others.

Second/Third Weeks

At the start of the second or perhaps at the end of the first week, teachers should review NOTETAKING procedures. Students are advised to record information on notebook paper or on 5 x 8 cards. The source of information and page number (or date of the interview) are recorded at the top of the page or card. Students are cautioned against copying word by word from a source, and, as a rule of thumb, students are told to avoid copying more than five continuous words from any one source. All notes are kept in a manila folder. On the outside is stapled the student's inquiry question. Formal notetaking procedures are usually not introduced until the second or third Inquiry Reading activity.

At least once during the second or third week, there is a PROBLEM SOLVING session in which students share specific problems they are encountering. Other students are encouraged to suggest solutions to these problems. At least once during the second or third week the student has a conference with the teacher to review progress; however, most of the time during these weeks is spent locating information and developing or constructing an announcement project.

Fourth Week

During the last week of Inquiry Reading, the projects are completed. Students have a dress rehearsal for their presentation with other members of the group, and then present to an outside group such as their homeroom or a parent group. Also during the last week, the teacher and student cooperatively evaluate the student's work.

Some of the inquiries which students have researched include:

What are the advantages/disadvantages of nuclear energy?

How do you become an actor?

What was Thomas Jefferson like as a person?

Many teachers have modified the Inquiry Reading activity by lengthening it or shortening it according to their needs. Some teachers have had the group of gifted students select an overall theme, and then each member of the group researched one question relating to that theme.

Often, Inquiry Reading activities work best if there is another individual willing to assist the teacher in the project. Often parents of gifted pupils are willing and able volunteers for this task. In some cases, high school students or college students have been enlisted. A cooperative librarian is a necessity if the project is to be successful.

Relation to PCRP

Inquiry Reading embodies many of the critical experiences outlined in PCRP. Children are often responding to literature as they conduct their research. At the same time, they are engaging in sustained silent reading of materials needed to answer their individual question. The announcement project always involves oral or written composing of some kind. Often, a more concrete type of composition (i.e. a diorama, mural, or skit) is also involved. Truly, Inquiry Reading not only challenges the curious minds of gifted readers, but also meets the instructional criteria for any good reading/language arts program.

THINK BOXES

Classroom teachers are concerned about meeting the needs of gifted students but find this task difficult with heterogeneously grouped classes. The wide range of abilities in a class make it difficult to provide for each individual's needs. Thus, individualized activities can be employed to challenge the developing minds of gifted students with some degree of independence.

Think Boxes were created to meet this need. Based on an idea suggested by Dorothy Sisk, and later modified by teachers and administrators in the Newark School District (Cassidy, 1979), Think Boxes are essentially a box containing independent activities which revolve around one theme and are designed to challenge the capabilities of gifted students.

Construction/Contents

Although there are many possible ways to construct Think Boxes, they generally follow a prescribed format. Activities in each Think Box deal with one general theme such as leadership, printing, shapes, monsters, survival. Furthermore, each activity in the Think Box relates to one or more of seven broad goals. The first four of these goals are in the cognitive domain and are similar, but not identical, to those suggested by Bloom (1956) in his taxonomy of educational objectives. Specifically they are:

1. Knowledge - The student will increase his or her knowledge in a specific area of interest and expand their interests into other areas (i.e., gathering additional facts or skills in an area of interest; investigating a new topic).

2. Research/Basic Skills - The student will apply the necessary skills to be independent learners (i.e., doing independent research).

3. Critical Thinking - The student will develop and refine critical thinking skills (i.e., drawing conclusions from given data, evaluating according to specific criteria).

4. Creative Thinking - The student will develop productive creativity and originality (i.e., generating divergent responses to a problem situation).

In addition, three goals for the Think Boxes deal with the affective domain:

5. Responsibility - The student will develop a sense of responsibility for setting realistic goals and for the achievement of these goals.

6. Appreciation of Learning - The student will enjoy and appreciate learning.

7. Adjustment - The student will develop an awareness and acceptance of themselves as individuals and as members of a group.

Usually an activity in a Think Box would have one cognitive and one affective goal. Although teachers are allowed to develop activities around all the cognitive goals, tasks stressing productive, creative thinking are encouraged. Generally, creative thinking is described in terms of four somewhat interrelated components:

Fluency - the ability to generate a large number of responses, given a stimulus or problem situation (i.e., Give 100 possible solutions to the energy crisis).

Flexibility - the ability to generate different kinds of responses (i.e., Give responses to the energy problem that would generally be classified in many different categories).

Elaboration - the ability to take a basic idea and expand it (i.e., Finish a story when a beginning is given).

Originality - the ability to come up with a truly novel response that no more than one in 10,000 might think of (i.e., Find a cure for cancer).

In addition, rather than just encouraging training activities to develop the various components of creativity, teachers are urged to provide students with opportunities to develop a product which in some

way communicates the results of their creative endeavors. The product could be a poem, an essay, a diorama, or an oral presentation. Whatever it is this product and the process involved in developing it can be some of the key ways to assess the progress of gifted and able students and the success of gifted programs.

Although the specific content of Think Boxes is usually a result of the creativity of their developer, all Think Boxes generally have at least fifteen task cards with a goal printed at the top and the directions for a given task at the bottom. Below is a typical task card from a Think Box, this one coming from a Think Box entitled "What is Real?" (Developed by Janet McCauley, Lancaster Lebanon Intermediate Unit, PA).

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Goal: Creative Thinking: The student will develop creativity and originality.

Task: Your task is to prepare a short presentation for the class, approximately five minutes in length. Your presentation will explain and illustrate to the class an interpretation of the word REAL. You may use one you learned through the previous activities or come up with one of your own. You may use any materials from the box. Be as creative and explicit as you can! Make an appointment with the teacher to present your interpretation.

In addition to the task cards, each Think Box usually contains at least two games which simulate real life problems or issues related to the theme of the box. One game from a box dealing with energy has students move around a gameboard and, as they landed on a square, make decisions about issues related to energy conservation. If their decisions resulted in the most efficient and effective saving of energy, they were allowed to stay on that particular square. Research has shown that simulation games can be very effective in developing thinking skills in gifted pupils (Cline 1979).

In addition to the task cards and the games, Think Boxes generally contain at least three other "things". These "things" can be short articles on a particular theme, books, equipment such as a microscope, and audio-visual materials such as filmstrips, tapes, etc. All of these items are usually contained in a box that is 16 inches long, 13 inches wide and 10 inches deep. The outside of the box is often attractively decorated to illustrate the contents of the box.

Ideas for Think Boxes

Ideas for Think Boxes can come from three different sources. First, they can be developed around the curriculum of one or more content areas, providing gifted students with an opportunity to do further reading and investigation of a topic that is already part of their curriculum. One eighth grade teacher developed a Think Box entitled "Hidden Per'sway'ders" which was based on propaganda techniques utilized in advertising. Students had previously been introduced to the topic as part of the regular social studies curriculum. The Think Box represented an attenpt to extend and enrich the basic course of study.

Another source of ideas for Think Boxes can be the interests of teachers themselves. If the teacher is genuinely enthusiastic about the topic, he or she will construct a Think Box that will develop an interest in the students even if none had been manifested previously. For example, one seventh grade teacher developed his Think Box around the theme "Williamsburg" because he himself was so interested in that subject. The ideas in the Think Box provided students with a good understanding of colonial culture, and, after completing the activities, the students were, indeed, "interested" in colonial Williamsburg.

Lastly, Think Boxes can be developed around the acknowledged interests of one or more of the gifted students in the class. One teacher, after explaining what a Think Box was, asked gifted students to identify a Think Box topic they would like. Much to the teacher's dismay, the students suggested "Electricity." In this case, the teacher probably learned as much about electricity in constructing the box as the students did in completing it.

Extension Activities

As a follow up to a Think Box activity, some teachers have had gifted or able students construct their own Think Boxes about a topic of particular interest to them. These student-constructed Think Boxes must follow the same specifications as the teacher developed boxes (i.e., fifteen task cards, two games, and at least three other "things"). Other gifted students complete the activities in the student-developed box just as they would with the teacher-constructed box.

Relation to PCRP

It is possible for Think Boxes to contain all of the basic thrusts of the Pennsylvania Comprehensive Reading Communication Arts Plan. However, Responding to Literature and Composing are the goals most often represented. Often, Think Boxes have focused upon a specific work of literature, such as "Romeo and Juliet," and have contained tasks which involve the students in both oral and written composing. Other boxes have been developed around the selected works of specific authors, such as O'Henry or Ray Bradbury. and again involve both oral and written composing.

SYMBOL STORIES

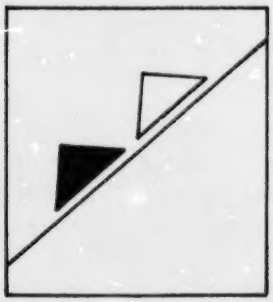
Guilford (1967) had developed a three-dimensional model of intelligence which includes 120 separate intellectual abilities. One dimension of the model stresses mental operations (i.e., cognition, memory, convergent production, divergent production, and evaluation) and another dimension describes the content or types of information that an individual processes in performing these mental operations (figural, symbolic, semantic and behavioral content). Since many books and articles have been written on the interpretation of the Guilford model, it would be counterproductive to attempt to explain this model in its entirety here Guilford and his followers (Meeker, 1969), however, argue that most of the activities planned for students in school stress only a limited number of the factors involved in intelligence. Usually, most pedagogical activities emphasize convergent production of some semantic variable. In reading, this criticism is particularly valid: teachers want one answer and they want this stated in words, phrases or sentences.

Typically, students are asked to read a story or passage and then answer questions about that story, either in oral or written form. The questions generally have a set answer which the teacher will classify as right or wrong. Questions which develop divergent or creative thinking are less obvious in the classroom, and student responses that take anything other than a verbal or semantic form are still rarer.

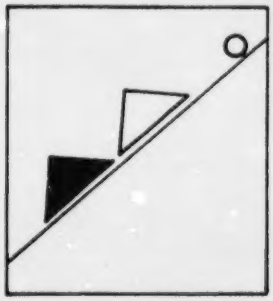
Divergent Production

Symbol Stories, however, offer a way for students to respond to their reading in a divergent and non-verbal manner. Essentially, after reading a story, students are asked to select five or six most important incidents from the story and then depict them in symbolic form. The teacher provides a simplified example like the one on page 10.

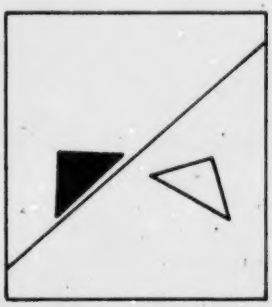
Jack and Jill



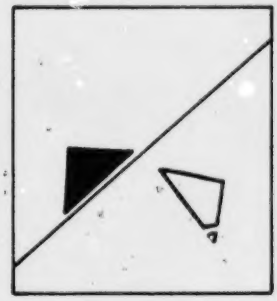
Went up the hill



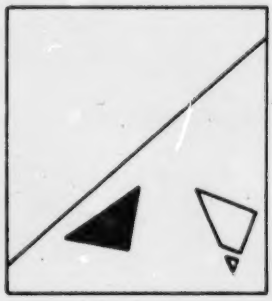
To fetch a pail
of water.



Jack fell down



And broke his crown



And Jill came
tumbling after.

The above six symbolic pictures represent the major occurances in the old nursery rhyme "Jack and Jill." However, these plot twists are told solely with the use of geometric figures.

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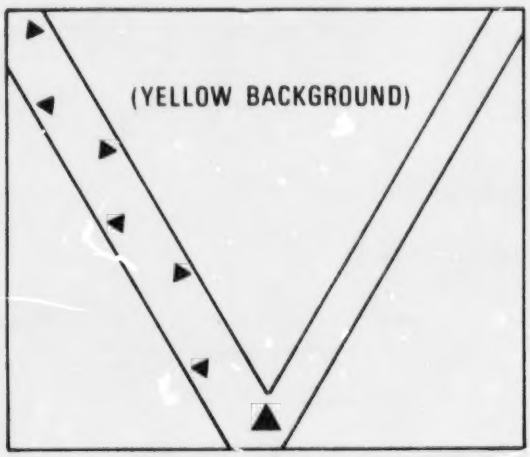
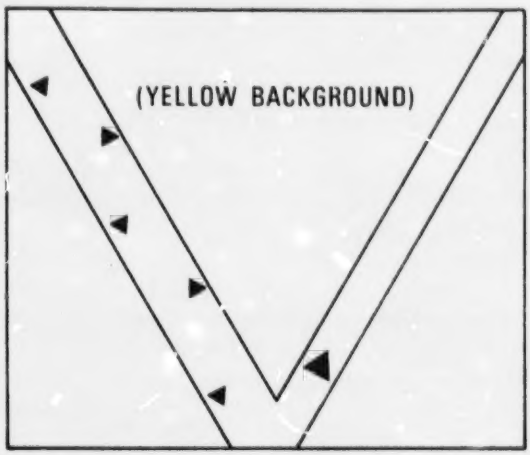
A more mature example of a Symbol Story might be the illustration below of Robert Frost's poem, "The Road Not Taken."

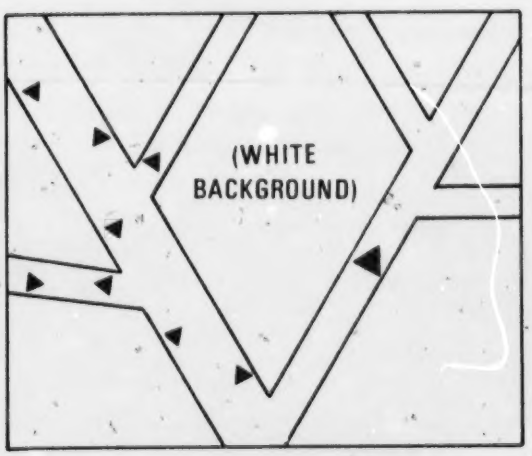
THE ROAD NOT TAKEN



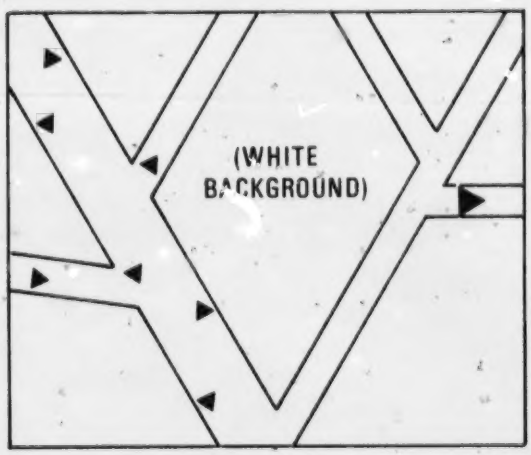
Two roads diverged in a yellow wood,
And sorry I could not travel both
And be one traveler, long I stood
And looked down one as far as I could
To where it bent in the undergrowth;



Then took the other, as just as fair,
And having perhaps the better claim,
Because it was grassy and wanted wear;
Though as for that, the passing there
Had worn them really about the same,



And both that morning equally lay
In leaves no step had trodden black.
Oh, I kept the first for another day!
Yet knowing how way leads on to way,
I doubted if I should ever come back.



I shall be telling this with a sigh
Somewhere ages and ages hence:
Two roads diverged in a wood, and I -
I took the one less traveled by,
And that has made all the difference.

Students may draw their Symbol Stories on overhead transparencies to be shown to the rest of the class, or the symbol stories may be depicted on a large piece of posterboard. Some other Symbol Stories which have been successfully depicted include Jaws, Silas Marner, and Saki's "The Open Window." Essentially, this activity requires students to carefully analyze the major plot elements or experiences in a story or poem and then think of a creative way to delineate these elements. Instead of words, students are forced to transform their thoughts into symbols relying on shape, size, color, and spatial relationships to convey meaning. A good deal of critical and creative thinking is required, but students are not forced to write pages of explanation nor are they asked to generate oral answers.

This kind of alternative is a nice variation in the traditional book report. Books and stories with strongly defined plots lend themselves easily to this activity.

Relation to PCRP

Obviously this activity requires a Response to Literature. Just as obviously, however, not all responses to literature should take this form. Symbol Stories, though, do develop creative thinking while at the same time calling upon a student to carefully analyze major plot elements.

CONCLUSION

Inquiry Reading, Think Boxes, and Symbol Stories are not the only reading activities which can challenge the intellects of gifted and able students. They are, however, three examples of strategies other than the basal readers that have proven successful with academically talented pupils at the junior high level. Creative teachers have many more.

Perhaps, if these strategies and others like them are used, parents and teachers of gifted and able children will perceive reading instruction when integrated with all the language arts, as a meaningful part of the curriculum. More importantly these students will have instruction designed to develop their creativity and critical thinking to its fullest potential.

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